

This week, nearly 3,000 people from more than 140 countries are gathering in downtown Washington D.C. as part of the world's largest international meeting of women's health and empowerment champions -- the Women Deliver Conference. At this critical time, these passionate and committed advocates are here to deliver a message that sustainable development around the globe can only be achieved if we prevent maternal deaths.

After the last Women Deliver Conference in 2007, I had my second child, traveled abroad to Peru with CARE as their Advocate for Maternal Health, and set out to make a documentary film about maternal mortality first-hand that hundreds of thousands of women die every year from pregnancy and childbirth complications, making reproductive health problems the leading cause of death worldwide among women ages 15 to 44; yet strikingly, experts estimate that 90% of these are preventable. The impact extends beyond individual lives. In fact each year millions of children are orphaned, and motherless children are twice as likely to die before the age of five. Economies suffer as well, with an estimated \$15 billion lost in productivity each year

Maternal mortality is a crisis without borders. Women die in rural African villages, crowded slums in Bangladesh, and even in hospitals in the U.S. where, according to Amnesty International, a poor woman's "lifetime risk of maternal [death] is greater than in 40 other countries, including virtually all industrialized nations." Women die because they cannot access the same simple, effective medical care that saved my life when I began to hemorrhage after the birth of my daughter. One of the most frustrating realities that I discovered is that underlying all of this is the tragic fact that women lack equitable status, rendering them voiceless and powerless. Why should the lives of some women be valued and others not? Such disparities in health care baffle me.

Fortunately, momentum has been building in recent years. Former UK Prime Minister Gordon Brown's extraordinary wife, Sarah, stepped into her role as Patron of The White Ribbon Alliance, a 148-country strong coalition committed to making pregnancy and childbirth safe for all women. Advocates gathering for this week's Women Deliver Conference can take pride in their role in achieving several remarkable milestones in the field of maternal health.

Here in the U.S., the Mexico City Policy, or the "Global Gag Rule" was rescinded, making it easier for women in developing countries to access contraceptives. This could help reduce maternal deaths due to unsafe abortion by a dramatic 82%. The recently passed U.S. health care reform bill includes unrestricted access to prenatal care. This will help reduce the inequities which make African American women four times as likely to die in childbirth as Caucasian women and Latinas twice as likely. In addition, the Obama administration has launched a \$63-billion dollar Global Health Initiative with maternal health as a core pillar. The Center for Strategic and International Studies convened an unprecedented bipartisan commission that called for family planning to be integrated into the Administration's maternal health efforts. In

2009, Congresswoman Betty McCollum introduced the Newborn, Child and Mother Survival Act, and last month Congresswoman Lois Capps introduced the Global MOMS Act which calls for a comprehensive U.S. government strategy to reduce mortality and improve maternal and newborn health through the Global Health Initiative.

The sum of all these efforts is truly remarkable. Yet now, more than ever, leadership is needed to sustain and enhance these fragile gains. We must abandon decades-old political arguments that have distracted us from a challenge that is truly pro-lives and pro-family: saving women's lives and ensuring that they have the ability to care for their families. We must integrate family planning health efforts, and overcome barriers to care including a lack of trained health workers, equipment, transportation and supplies in poor countries.

We are at a critical moment. The G8 Summit is just a few weeks away and maternal and child health is at the center of its agenda. This provides the perfect opportunity for the U.S to build on the momentum of the last few years and help ensure a global commitment that will deliver. I remain cautiously optimistic and hope that our global leaders seize this opportunity to keep this issue where it belongs development agenda, because EVERY MOTHER COUNTS.

The author is a global health activist whose new documentary, No Woman, No Cry, will be released later this year as part of the www.everymothercounts.org campaign.